

SEEING HOPE IN TRIAL: KIERKEGAARD AND SHI TIESHENG READING JOB

BY LUYING CHEN

Abstract: This essay compares the theme of suffering as a trial in *Repetition* (1843) and Shi Tiesheng's *Fragmented Writings between Sicknesses* (2002). I identify four movements of the young man reading Job: turning inward, identifying with Job, identifying a false theology that suffering is a divine punishment, and teaching about "trial" affirming contending with God and pointing to hope. In similar moves, Shi reads Job to refute the Buddhist concept of suffering as karmic retribution. Shi's narrative of becoming an individual and an author echoes Kierkegaard's warning about the crowd. Doubting the existence of a preternatural heaven, Shi does not commit to the Christian religious subjectivity. He offers an antithesis to Kierkegaard's individual, sharing existing Chinese literary and religious subject positions that he must reject in order to exist. This reading illuminates Shi's thinking pattern in its affinity with and departure from Kierkegaard, clarifying the nature of Shi's "religious syncretism."¹

Keywords: suffering, Job, trial, hope, individual, antithesis

Dubbed "the Job among Chinese writers,"² Shi Tiesheng 史铁生 (1951–2010) became well known in China for his essay "Wo yu Ditan" 我与地坛 (I and the Altar to Earth, 1991).³ Recounting his retreats to Beijing's Altar to Earth Park for years after he was

¹ I thank Ms. Chen Ximi for patiently answering questions from me over the past decade on Shi Tiesheng's works and sending me books. Many friends from China and America tirelessly searched for articles for me: Dr. Zhang Jianfei, Dr. Duan Lijun, Ms. Shen Hongmei, and Dr. Lang Chen. I thank Cynthia Lund and Elizabeth L. Black from the Hong Kierkegaard Library for welcoming me into the library. Finally, my thanks to the anonymous reviewers and to Colleen O'Reilly, Anna L. Söderquist, and Dawna Hendricks.

² Xia Weidong 夏维东, "Shi Tiesheng: Zhongguo zuojia li de Yuebo 史铁生：中国作家里的约伯" [Shi Tiesheng: the Job among Chinese writers], *Jintian*, May 26, 2011, <https://www.jintian.net/today/?action-viewnews-itemid-29768>.

³ Shi Tiesheng 史铁生, "Wo yu Ditan" 我与地坛 [I and the Altar to Earth], in *Shi Tiesheng Zuopin Xilie* 史铁生作品系列 [Shi Tiesheng works in series], vol. 3 (Beijing: Renmin Wenxue, 2011). English translations are mine.

paralyzed at age twenty-one, Shi confesses his preoccupation with three questions: “First, do I want to die? Second, for what do I live? Third, why do I want to write?”⁴ In 2003, Shi won the Sinophone Literature and Media Award from China’s politically outspoken newspaper, *Southern Metropolis Daily*, for his life-long achievement as a writer. He was commended for *Bing Xi Suibi* 病隙碎笔 (Fragmented writings between sicknesses, 2002, hereafter *Fragmented Writings*),⁵ a book of six chapters containing 243 essay fragments written between his hospital visits for dialysis. Meditating on finding purpose in suffering, history, truth and subjectivity, aesthetics, and bioethics, among other topics, Shi references many literary and philosophical texts from around the world. He explains a key concept informing his idea “xinliu” 心流 (the heart’s movement) as what Søren Kierkegaard “probably means by subjective truth.”⁶

Scholars have begun to note a connection between Shi and Kierkegaard. In our respective studies, Gu Lin 顾林 and I explain the context for the above fragments mostly by paraphrasing Shi’s own words.⁷ Li Tao 李涛 engages with Kierkegaard a bit more when connecting Shi’s views on disability to Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Onto Death*.⁸ However, a more thorough comparison of Shi and Kierkegaard is called for. This essay examines their shared vision of suffering as a trial leading to hope and the author’s position as a singular individual. In section one, I identify the concept of Job’s trial as the core of the story of suffering in Kierkegaard’s *Repetition: A Venture in Experimenting Psychology* (1843, hereafter *Repetition*), attributed to the pseudonymous author Constantin Constantius.⁹ In section two, I explain how Shi reads Job as proceeding through a series of conceptual movements that are parallel to the young man in *Repetition*. In section three, I engage in the debate about Shi’s “religious syncretism” by comparing his narrative on becoming an author

⁴ Ibid., 14.

⁵ Shi Tiesheng 史铁生, *Bing Xi Suibi* 病隙碎笔 [Fragmented writings between sicknesses] (Xi’an: Shan’xi Normal University Press, 2002). The book has had several reprints and an edition by China Braille Press in 2008. References are to the original Chinese book, with chapter followed by section number and page number. English translations are mine, with assistance from Matthew Venker.

⁶ Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, II:39–40, p. 90.

⁷ Gu Lin 顾林, “信仰与救赎—史铁生思想研究” [Faith and salvation: research into Shi Tiesheng’s thought] (PhD diss., Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2015), p. 56. Luying Chen 陈陆鹰, “The Solitary Writer in Shi Tiesheng’s *Fragments Written at the Hiatus of Sickness*.” *Chinese Literature Today* 6, no. 1 (2017): pp. 73–74.

⁸ Li Tao 李涛, *Canji yu aiqing: lun Shi Tiesheng de liangge shengming mima* 残疾与爱情—论史铁生的两个生命密码 [Disability and love: on Shi Tiesheng’s two life codes] (Master’s thesis, Xinan Daxue 西南大学 [Southwest University], 2011), pp. 4–12.

⁹ SKS 4, 7–96 / R, 123–231.

with Kierkegaard's warning about the crowd in *Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author* from *The Point of View*.¹⁰ Shi offers an antithesis to Kierkegaard's individual, emphasizing the subject positions that he rejects more than affirming a religious position.

1. From Suffering to Trial: Reading Job in *Repetition*

At the beginning of *Repetition*, the narrator Constantin associates repetition with happiness: "Repetition . . . if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy."¹¹ As a confidant to an anonymous young man whose melancholy has worsened after he fell in love with and became engaged to a young woman, Constantin concludes that the young man, though "deeply and fervently in love," was "able to recollect his love" a few days later. He was "essentially through with the entire relationship."¹² In Part Two, the young man sends letters to Constantin after breaking off his engagement with his fiancée in which he details his reading of the Book of Job. After discoursing on the meaning of Job's trial, he awaits his thunderstorm, expecting to repeat Job's experience of regaining double his losses, so that he would be "fit to be a husband" and to have his honor "saved" and his pride "redeemed."¹³ In his last letter, the young man describes regaining his selfhood upon reading in the newspaper of the young woman's marriage to another man: "Is there not, then, a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning?"¹⁴

Much scholarly attention has been given to explaining why Constantin fails to experience repetition during his second trip to Berlin while the young man succeeds in achiev-

¹⁰ Shi's widow, author and editor Chen Ximi 陈希米, shared that Shi read three books that informed his writing of *Fragmented Writings*: Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Cunzai Zhuyi 存在主义* [Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre], trans. Chen Guying 陈鼓应, Meng Xiangsen 孟祥森 and Liu Qi 刘崎 (Beijing: Shangwu yinshu guan, 1987); Luther J. Binkley, *Lixiang de Chongtu: Xifang shehui bianhua zhe de jiazhi guannian 理想的冲突: 西方社会变化的价值观念* [Conflict of Ideals: Changing Values in Western Society], trans. Ma Yuande 马元德 et. al., (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 1983); and Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, *Zouxiang Shizijia shang de zhen 走向十字架上的真* [Approaching the truth on the cross] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1994). WeChat direct message to author, June 24, 2023.

¹¹ SKS 4, 7 / R, 131.

¹² SKS 4, 14 / R, 136.

¹³ SKS 4, 81 / R, 214.

¹⁴ SKS 4, 87–88 / R, 220–221.

ing repetition. For example, Claire Carlisle defines repetition as “a movement of becoming, of truth coming into existence.”¹⁵ Constantin’s failure results from his preoccupation with the “externality,” or “external aspects of existence” instead of inwardness.¹⁶ His intellectual perspective limits him “to discover repetition’s movement into actuality.”¹⁷ The young man’s “movement away from Constantin symbolizes the transformation taking place within his consciousness: the transition from ideality to actuality, from philosophy to existence, which is expressed in the concept of repetition.”¹⁸ Carlisle identifies “inwardness, difference, faith and love” as themes that “constitute truth as the movement of repetition” in the young man.¹⁹ Ionuț-Alexandru Bârliba agrees with Carlisle on these points.²⁰ Bârliba further identifies “three progressively linked moments that determine” the process of the young man’s “inner transformation.” Moment one is “the confessional relation, friendship with Constantin Constantius.” Moment two is the young man “putting his own existence under the example of Job’s trials.” Moment three is “the re-turn, the re-discovery of the self as an expression of repetition.”²¹ With attention to moment two, Bârliba redirects the discussion from repetition to the theme of suffering, to which Andrew J. Burgess had called attention two decades ago.²²

Burgess urged us to see that the book has “at least two” themes and is “two stories told at once.” The story of suffering “as felt by the unnamed young man” is as important as that about repetition.²³ A critical part of this story of suffering, I argue, is the young man’s process of reading Job leading up to his discourse on Job’s “trial.” Seeing Job’s trial, the young man acknowledges suffering, but more importantly, affirms that, with suffering such as Job’s, an individual’s contending with God points to the direction of hope. I

¹⁵ Claire Carlisle, “Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*: the Possibility of Motion.” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (2005): p. 522.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 531.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 523.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 534.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 532.

²⁰ Ionuț-Alexandru Bârliba, “Søren Kierkegaard’s *Repetition*: Existence in Motion,” *Symposion: Theoretical and Applied Inquiries in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 1, no. 1 (2014): pp. 23–49. The above quotes from Carlisle are found on pp. 27, 35, 44, and 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 40; see also Andrew J. Burgess, “*Repetition—A Story of Suffering*,” *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 6: *Fear and Trembling and Repetition*, ed. Robert L. Perkins (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), p. 247.

²³ Burgess, “*Repetition—A Story of Suffering*,” p. 247.

identify four distinctive movements in Bârliba's moment two: turning inward by declaring independence from the external world's judgment and establishing his position as an author (A), identifying with Job (B), critiquing the false theology of Job's friends (C), and offering "trial" as a correct understanding of Job's suffering (D). Seeing the deep suffering of Job, the young man, and Kierkegaard himself, Burgess maintains that "with Job and those who are taught by his example . . . patient suffering promotes the understanding of suffering by avoiding the detached reflection and by sharing the situation of the sufferer."²⁴ I will do my part of this "sharing" by quoting and paraphrasing the young man's own words as much as possible.

In the first movement (*Repetition A*, August 15 letter), the young man declares his independence from Constantin by diagnosing the latter's pathology. He describes Constantin as having "a demonic" and "indescribable" power that holds him "captive" and makes him anxious. He admires Constantin, and yet at times Constantin seems "mentally disordered" to have subjected "to such a degree, every passion, every emotion, every mood under the cold regimentation of reflection!" He criticizes Constantin's "calm and cold good sense" in advising the young man to pretend to be a despicable person and a deceptive lover to the young woman. He forbids Constantin from answering his letter, thereby switching from the position of the one who suffers silently to an author who controls the narrative of his suffering.²⁵

Three stages of identification with Job mark the young man's second movement. First, he gives a sweeping summary of the entire Book of Job that affirms Job's lament as a sign of having faith (*Repetition B1*, September 19 letter). He uses the phrase "professional comforters" for those who prescribe to the distressed Job's declaration "the Lord gave, and the Lord took away; blessed be the name of the Lord."²⁶ In this context, "professional comforters" do not empathize with the one who is suffering. Calling Job's the "voice of the suffering, the cry of the grief-stricken, the shriek of the terrified, and a relief to all who bore their torment in silence," he identifies "fear of God" in Job's complaint to God. Referencing Job 38 to 42, where God answers Job in the thunder, he concludes that even if God's answer "crushes a man," it is "more glorious than the gossip and rumors about the righteousness of Governance that are invented by human wisdom." Even though he

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

²⁵ SKS 4, 59–60 / R, 189–190.

²⁶ SKS 4, 66 / R, 197, referencing Job 1:21.

has not lost as much as Job did, he identifies with Job, who has lost his beloved and his “honor and pride and along with it the vitality and meaning of life.”²⁷

The October 11 letter describes the young man’s second stage (*Repetition B2*), experiencing and slowly exiting a phase of loathing existence matching Job in Job 3. At first living with confusion as to whether he was guilty in ending his engagement, he eventually defends his own innocence, deciding that if he marries the young woman, “she is crushed.”²⁸ He mentions his “spiritual actuality,”²⁹ but also states, “there is no one who understands me. My pain and my suffering are nameless, even as I myself am nameless.”³⁰

In the third stage (*Repetition B3*, November 15 letter), the young man exits the above phase of lethargy, entering Job’s world of protest. Every word by Job is “food and clothing and healing for my wretched soul.” Repeatedly reading the book, he calls Job’s friends “evil men . . . who have brought all this grief upon Job,” and “sit there barking at him.” He weeps when developing “a nameless anxiety about the world and life and men,” so much so that “everything crushes” his soul.³¹ He enters Job’s silence during the seven days when Job goes through a second trial with physical suffering.³² He makes Job’s cries his own: “Alas, if only a man could take God to court as a child of man does his fellow.”³³ This passionate identification with Job leaves the young man with horror, “as if by reading about it I brought it upon myself, just as one becomes ill with the sickness one reads about.”³⁴

In contrast, the December 14 letter demonstrates the young man, a convalescent, making a third and fourth movement: identifying a false theology (*Repetition C*) and asserting the correct reading of “trial” (*Repetition D*). He calls Job’s position “in the right,” and says that Job’s friends are wrong to insist that Job’s calamity is “a punishment; he must repent, beg for forgiveness, and then all will be well again.”³⁵ He states that Job tries, in vain, to “move his friends to compassion” by pleading “have pity on me.” Job’s “cry of anguish

²⁷ SKS 4, 66–67 / R, 197–199.

²⁸ SKS 4, 69 / R, 201.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ SKS 4, 71 / R, 203.

³¹ SKS 4, 72–73 / R, 204–205.

³² See Job 2:13. Unless otherwise noted, my references to the Bible are to the English Standard Version.

³³ SKS 4, 74 / R, 206, referencing Job 16:21. This translation of the passage in Job is made “according to the older Danish version” of the biblical passage, as found in Kierkegaard’s text (see translator’s note R, 372 n. 32).

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ SKS 4, 76 / R, 208.

becomes more and more intense as his friends' opposition drives his thoughts even deeper into his sufferings."³⁶

The young man then explains that Job's suffering is "a trial." For the sake of tracing the parallels with Shi's "trial," I group his ideas into four sub-points. First (D1), a "trial," which describes a man's relationship to God, is beyond the explanation of science because it "exists only for the individual."³⁷ Second (D2), an individual must go through a difficult period of ethical self-reflection: "First of all, the event must be cleared of its cosmic associations and get a religious baptism and a religious name, then one must appear before ethics for examination, and then comes the expression: a trial [*Prøvelse*]."³⁸ Third (D3), as if anticipating and contending with Kierkegaard in the "Upbuilding Discourse" on Job 1:21, he maintains that Job's greatness is not in the famous words found in that passage, which Job never repeated. He argues instead that "Job's significance is that the disputes at the boundaries of faith are fought out in him, that the colossal revolt of the wild and aggressive powers of passion is presented here" and that Job gives "temporary alleviation."³⁹ Fourth (D4), Job's trial began with "Satan's creation of discord between God and Job and ends with the whole thing having been a trial."⁴⁰ The category of "trial" is "not esthetic, ethical, or dogmatic;" it is transcendent and it "places a person in a purely personal relationship of opposition to God, in a relationship such that he cannot allow himself to be satisfied with any explanation at second hand."⁴¹ To quote Bårliba, "the individual doesn't need to seek for explanations or rationalizations for his suffering."⁴² The category of "trial" affirms that the individual has space to continue asking God, in suffering.

From a silent sufferer, to an author of letters who can verbalize the extent of his suffering, to the author of "the category of trial," the young man rises to the position of a teacher about the universality of Job's story. The Book of Job supports the authority of

³⁶ Job 19:21, New International Version; SKS 4, 77 / R, 208–209.

³⁷ SKS 4, 77 / R, 209.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, trans. mod. from "ordeal" to "trial." Job 23:10 uses "prøver" (verb), commonly translated as "test" or "trial," and in this context, Kierkegaard clearly uses "Prøvelse" to reference "trial." I thank Cæcilie Varslev-Pedersen for confirming the translation in Danish.

³⁹ SKS 4, 77 / R, 209–210.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ SKS 4, 77–78 / R, 210.

⁴² Bårliba, "Existence in Motion," p. 47.

his voice. God vindicates Job in front of his friends, declaring that Job speaks more rightly about Him than they do.⁴³

The development of *Repetition* illustrates that “trial” is a transcendental category. The young man in existence did not know how his story would evolve. Initially, falling short of his vision in the trial discourse, he expects the same result as Job’s, in a moment full of self-irony in the February 17 letter when he wishes to regain his lover. In an earlier ending to *Repetition*, the young man, out of despair, ends his life in the fashion of Goethe’s Werther.⁴⁴ A development in Kierkegaard’s own life, the news of his former fiancée Regine getting married, prompted him to write a new ending.⁴⁵ Kierkegaard initially felt dismayed and bitter at this news.⁴⁶ However, in the May 31 letter, the fictional young man describes the young woman’s generosity in granting him freedom. Asking how “a repetition of worldly possessions,” which is “indifferent toward the qualification of the spirit,” could compare with a repetition of the self, i.e., regaining the self, he affirms the spiritual. Job did not receive his children double again, “for a human life cannot be redoubled that way. Here only repetition of the spirit is possible, even though it is never so perfect in time as in eternity, which is the true repetition.”⁴⁷ Apparently, the writing reflects the writer’s own spiritual growth.

Growth is not linear, as is already clear in the picture of the young man waiting for his thunderstorm. The young man’s return as the author of “The Story of Suffering” in *Stages on Life’s Way* (1845), in which he names his depression as a reason for his inability to marry his fiancée, reveals the intensity, depth, and long period of his suffering, echoing the October 11 letter in *Repetition*. However, this only proves the truth of “trial” as a category. It points to hope, not immediate happiness. In his critique of Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous works in *Postscript*, the pseudonymous author Johannes Climacus affirms the young man’s concept.⁴⁸ Also mentioning a connection between *Repetition* and “The Story of Suffering,”⁴⁹ Climacus says “there is still hope for” the young man, calling his

⁴³ Job 42:7–8.

⁴⁴ Claire Carlisle, *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Søren Kierkegaard* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), p. 163.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 167–168.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ SKS 4, 88 / R, 221.

⁴⁸ SKS 7, 239 / CUP1, 263

⁴⁹ SKS 7, 264 / CUP1, 289.

situation “essentially depression of thought.”⁵⁰ Both the young man’s “trial” and this notion of “depression of thought” point to hope in suffering, toward spiritual growth.

2. Reading Job, Refuting Karmic Retribution

Shi enters this space of reading the Book of Job as a suffering person, seeing the direction of hope. According to Chen Ximi 陈希米, Shi read both the Book of Job and *Repetition*, but reading Job was more life changing.⁵¹ Shi published his fragments on Job before he read *Repetition*.⁵² However, he makes movements similar to the young man’s, although not in exactly the same order: declaring independence from the external authoritative judgment (Shi A), affirming Job’s faith (Shi B1), theorizing suffering (Shi C), and naming a false perspective on suffering (Shi D). Writing no longer as a young man but an established author, Shi’s fourth movement reveals his former stage of contending with God (*Repetition* B2, loathing existence) during the days when he retreated to the Altar to Earth Park.

Shi’s first movement includes both *Repetition* A and C. The young man sees pathology in Constantin; Shi sees the wrong in an authoritative interpretation of suffering, in his case, the popular Buddhist view of karmic retribution. *Fragmented Writings* I:3 acknowledges that for over half of his forty-eight years of life, “before one illness leaves, the next has already arrived.” Even worse than his physical suffering, he encounters in others “a certain point of view” that living in his condition is “a punishment—for bad deeds committed in a previous lifetime.”⁵³ Shi disagrees that suffering is divine punishment for misdeeds (*Repetition* C). He also rejects the practice of going to the temple to burn incense and asking for blessings for better health. He feels instead that praying should be thanksgiving. He learns to be content and to understand that “each catastrophe could be worse.”⁵⁴ Even though losing his mobility felt like losing his humanity at the time, he is thankful that he did not lose his eyesight, as the doctors had feared. He reflects: “Humans have this bad habit of forgetting the good fortunes and remembering the bad. That is . . .

⁵⁰ SKS 7, 271 / CUP1, 297.

⁵¹ WeChat direct message to author, April 25, 2020.

⁵² Shi only read Chinese translations of works written in non-Chinese languages (see Shi, *Fragmented Writings* II:40). The first Chinese translation of *Repetition* was published a year after the publication of Shi’s chapter in *Huacheng* 花城 no. 4 (July 1999): pp. 53–69. *Chongfu* 重复 [Repetition], trans. Wang Baihua 王柏华 (Tianjin 天津: Baihua wenyi chubanshe, 2000).

⁵³ Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:3, p. 5.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, I:4, p. 6.

an injustice to the *shenming* 神明 (divine).⁵⁵ This is not exactly like Job worshipping God in Job 1:21, but Shi acknowledges that the divine does not owe him anything. His object of thanksgiving is not yet clear, hence he uses the term *shenming* 神明, a traditional Chinese general term for the divine.

Comparable to *Repetition B1*, Shi affirms Job's faith and acknowledges God's sovereignty with a view of the entire Book of Job. He summarizes Job's contending with God as to why he, being so pious, suffers so much? Then he goes right to Job 38–42:

God scolded Job and his friends for not understanding the meaning of suffering. God pointed Job to His mighty creation. What He meant was: "This is the entirety that you must accept, a reality of incomparable might; this is the whole world, from which you cannot simply remove suffering."⁵⁶

This alludes to Job 40:2, where God challenges Job's questioning of His justice: "Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it." And also to Job 40:8: "Will you even put me in the wrong? Will you condemn me that you may be in the right?" Like the young man, Shi believes that for Job, seeing God's power is more important than getting an answer to why he suffers. In terms of Job's eventual understanding, Shi argues, God is omnipotent, which reflects Job's repentance to God in Job 42:2: "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."

In the same fragment, Shi makes a third movement (Shi C) evoking *Repetition D*, sharing a theological perspective on suffering. In the biblical text, God does not scold Job for "not understanding the meaning of suffering." Rather, in Job 42:8, God deems Job more right than his friends. Shi's addition emphasizes the meaning of suffering with a standard theological interpretation of the Book of Job.⁵⁷ Further, Shi's view regarding the limitation of science to explain human suffering matches *Repetition D1* in the young man's "trial." Shi synthesizes Job's theistic view of the universe with the Daoist conception of human beings being in harmony with the universe.⁵⁸ He reframes the whole problem by placing humans in a theistic universe. The whole cannot change its purpose because of a part: "This is perhaps why God does not answer every prayer request. This is perhaps

⁵⁵ Ibid., I:5, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., I:6, p. 7.

⁵⁷ See for example, D. A. Carson, "Job: Mystery and Faith," in *How Long O Lord?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), pp. 153–178.

⁵⁸ Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:7–8, pp. 7–8.

also the permanent predicament of humanity.”⁵⁹ There are sufferings which cannot be explained scientifically or rationally. God’s non-interference in the human world, such as not removing suffering, does not mean He cannot do it. In terms of Job’s eventual understanding, Shi argues, God is omnipotent.

Shi’s fourth movement displays three aspects simultaneously. First (Shi D1), Shi takes a step similar to *Repetition C* by seeing Satan’s role in Job’s test (see *Repetition D3*) and reiterating the real source of Job’s suffering as the result of a false belief. Summarizing the biblical text from Job 1:9 to the end of Job 2, Shi notes that initially, Job did not succumb to Satan’s logic that Job’s faith in God is dependent on God’s blessings. But, Job was “almost lost because of a different distortion of faith: ‘Job, all of your suffering must have been because you have offended God!’ These words terrified Job more than the devil himself. Job started to feel wronged, and he began to complain that God was unjust.”⁶⁰ This focus on the horror inflicted by Job’s friends matches the essence of the young man’s reading of Job in *Repetition*. For Shi, the popular Buddhist view is the same as the distorted faith of Job’s friends and the cause of his bitterness: “Many times people have told me that maybe, at some point in the past, I was careless and let a few bad words about Buddha slip out, so that this might be the cause of my constant illness. Hearing this, I became as bitter as Job.”⁶¹

“I and the Altar to Earth” offers a glimpse into Shi’s bitterness at the time. He struggled with unemployment, feelings of guilt after his mother’s sudden death, disability and suffering in the world, and his own anxiety from the pressure to publish. At each moment of crisis, he speaks about “Shangdi” 上帝, a term for the divine existing in Chinese classics that Matteo Ricci adopted as the Chinese name for the Christian God.⁶² The first two moments ended with him understanding God as a provider and a protector. Reaching peace similar to *Repetition 2B3*, he turns his eyes to the natural beauty in the park. However, a third crisis, provoked by him seeing a little girl with an intellectual disability, leaves him uncertain: “Things in the world often make God’s intention suspicious.” One “can complain to God about why he has sent so many tribulations into the world” or “strive to eliminate all kinds of suffering and enjoy feeling noble and proud.” But, “if you

⁵⁹ Ibid., I:8, p. 8.

⁶⁰ Ibid., I:9, p. 9.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Qi Guohua 戚国华, “Si yu xin: Shi Tiesheng yu Yuebo Shangdi guan de bijiao” 思与信：史铁生与约伯上帝观的比较 [Thinking vs. believing: a comparison of Shi Tiesheng’s Shangdi with Job’s God], *Hubei shehui kexue* 湖北社会科学 [Hubei Social Sciences] 2013, no. 4: p. 124.

think a little further, you'll fall into a deep abyss, and get lost there: can a world without suffering exist?"⁶³ The Daoist view on differences as complementary enables Shi to come out of the abyss:⁶⁴

If ugliness didn't exist, how could beauty sustain its luck? If evil and despicability didn't exist, how could goodness and nobility define itself to become a virtue? If there weren't disabilities, would people become so used to health that they feel bored? . . . Seen from that perspective, differences must always exist. It seems that you must accept suffering—the entire script of the theatre of humanity requires it. Existence itself requires it.⁶⁵

Shi reluctantly agrees, "it seems that God is, once again, right." However, when it comes to individual fate, he despairs again: "Who is to play the suffering roles? Who is to showcase worldly happiness, pride, and pleasure? You can only leave it to chance."⁶⁶ Writing became Shi's way to seek salvation and meaning.

By calling the accusation of karmic retribution identical to the false belief of Job's friends, *Fragmented Writings* I:9 resolves his fruitless questioning in "I and the Altar to Earth": "Also, when I say that we're all prone to complaining like Job, I mean that we all complain that fate is unjust when things don't go our way."⁶⁷ Now he overcomes his bitterness: "But life is just as God showed Job it is: Dangers are everywhere and ever-present, and no one gets special treatment for being additionally pious."⁶⁸

Instead of waiting for a thunderstorm to have his health restored, Shi immediately transitions from Job's faith in trial to the discourse of faith as hope:

God makes no promises of glory or fortune, but he will always protect your hope. Humans can't avoid suffering, but also can't abandon hope. It is precisely in this sense that God exists. Fate takes no bribes, but hope coexists with you. This is the true meaning of faith and the true path of the faithful.⁶⁹

Recalling a friend enduring a terminal illness, bedridden for three years, Shi concludes: "I learned this from Job's story: in front of true faith is a vast open space. There is only

⁶³ Shi, "I and the Altar," p. 13.

⁶⁴ For an overview of this Daoist concept, see *Daodejing* 道德经, ch. 2 in Roger T. Ames and David L. Hall, trans. *Daodejing: A Philosophical Translation* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), pp. 79–81.

⁶⁵ Shi, "I and the Altar," p. 13.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:9, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., I:10, p. 10.

hope, nothing else, even if you want more.”⁷⁰ Faith’s “blessing only comes when we walk through hardships.”⁷¹

Bidding farewell to the past, Shi names his former erroneous way of praying and identifies his “shen” 神 in distinction from the false gods. Inside the Altar to Earth, when praying to the “shenming” 神明 (gods), his heart was full of personal desire.⁷² Shi identifies two kinds of unreliable “shen” 神 (gods). The first kind is always “tooting his own horn, bragging and boasting of its omnipotence. In reality, we see plenty of instances where the Dragon frequently floods the Dragon King’s temple.”⁷³ “Long Wang” 龙王, the Dragon King, is worshipped in religious Daoism. This second kind of god “likes pranks, playing with chance, and causing people to lose their way.”⁷⁴ Both kinds of “gods” are unpredictable and unreliable. Declaring “I have been looking for him for years and so I have some personal experience [of what each god is like],” Shi affirms the third God. Extremely benevolent and absolutely perfect, this God is “the only one worthy of your trust” because “in equating the way with the act of walking it, he promises to be with you always,” blessing you with “everlasting hope.”⁷⁵

3. Becoming an Individual, Not Kierkegaard’s “Individual”

By seeing suffering as a trial, Shi and Kierkegaard’s young man “met” with Job in the middle part of Job 23:10, “But he knows the way that I take; *when he has tried me*, I shall come out as gold” (emphasis added). Neither the young man nor Shi declares Job’s firm faith. Both Kierkegaard and Shi depict an “I” in the process of becoming. As Burgess concludes, the young man [in *Repetition*] “provides an important link with many of Kierkegaard’s later religious works,” especially Part Three, “The Gospel of Suffering, Christian Discourses” in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*.⁷⁶ Qi Guohua 戚国华 uses the letter M to describe Shi’s wavering faith and lack of commitment to a specific God,⁷⁷ in

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., I:11, p. 11.

⁷² Ibid., I:12, p. 12. In the original Chinese text, Shi switches from “shenming” 神明 in section 12 to “shen” 神 in section 13. I am using “gods” for Shi’s first two kinds of “shen” in the same sense that Psalm 86 references “the gods” in distinction from “God.”

⁷³ Ibid., I:13, p. 12.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid., I:15, pp. 13–14.

⁷⁶ Burgess, “*Repetition—A Story of Suffering*,” pp. 261–262.

⁷⁷ Qi, “Si yu xin,” p. 125.

contrast to the letter N which characterizes Job's faith journey from a strong believer in a God with a name to one who questions and contends with God and finally to a firm believer in the same God. Shi leaves behind a posthumously published essay "Zhou Xin Jidu, Ye Xin Fo" 昼信基督夜信佛 (Believing in Christ during the day and in the Buddha at night).⁷⁸ As Chloe Starr summarizes, Shi has been called a "Wheelchair humanist," a "Christian writer," and a "Buddhist apologist."⁷⁹ Lang Chen 陈朗 argues that Shi's religious views were "rooted deeply in the rich syncretic tradition of Chinese religion and became fully pronounced in the final, posthumously published essay."⁸⁰

A missing piece in this discussion is Shi's indebtedness to Kierkegaard's discourse on the individual versus the crowd, which Shi read from the excerpt "The Single Individual" from Kierkegaard's *Two "Notes" Concerning My Work as an Author*.⁸¹ In Note No.1, Kierkegaard explicates the crowd as representing "untruth," as opposed to "truth," by which he always means *eternal truth*. Referencing Paul's idea that "only one reaches the goal," found in 1 Corinthians 9:24 and Philippians 3:14, Kierkegaard claims that everyone "essentially should speak only with God and with himself."⁸² God "surveys these countless millions and recognizes each and every individual."⁸³ Where "there is a crowd or where decisive importance is attributed to the fact that there is a crowd, there is no working *there*, no living there, no striving there for the highest goal but only for some earthly goal." "Each individual who escapes [*flygte*] into the crowd and thus cowardly avoids [*flye*] being the single individual . . . contributes his portion of cowardliness to the 'cowardliness' that is: a crowd." As the "supreme example" of the crowd as untruth, Kierkegaard states that it was in a religious crowd, not as an individual, that the people spat on Christ and crucified him. As a second example, Kierkegaard distinguishes the purpose of doing "devout work" as "the truth-witness" from being part of a political crowd. The former "does his utmost to see to it that he is not confused with a politician," aiming "to become involved with everyone if possible, but always individually." The purpose is that these individuals might

⁷⁸ Shi Tiesheng, "Zhou xin Jidu, Ye Xin Fo" 昼信基督夜信佛 [Believing in Christ during the day and the Buddha at night], ed. Chen Ximi 陈希米 (*Shouhuo* 收获 [Harvest], 2012), 1:5–12, repr. in *Zhou xin Jidu, Ye Xin Fo* 昼信基督夜信佛 (Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012). References are to this latter book.

⁷⁹ Chloe Starr, "Shi Tiesheng and the Nature of the Human," *Christianity & Literature* 68, no. 1 (2018): p. 104.

⁸⁰ Lang Chen 陈朗, "Disability Theology Despite Itself: Shi Tiesheng, Religion, and Social Criticism in Post-Socialist China," *Journal of Disability and Religion* 24, no. 4 (2020): p. 403.

⁸¹ See Note 9 above.

⁸² SKS 16, 86 / PV, 106; see PV, 319 n. 80.

⁸³ SKS 16, 87 / PV, 107. Kierkegaard is possibly alluding here to Proverbs 15:3.

“go home from the gathering and become the single individual” who has a personal relationship with God. On the contrary, though politics has its own legitimacy, Kierkegaard says that it “becomes untruth when it is carried over into the realms of the intellectual, the spiritual, and the religious” and that “politics etc. has nothing to do with *eternal truth*.” Thirdly, Kierkegaard calls “the public” that reads “the daily press” and judges a person in anonym “untruth.” Referencing Jesus’ first and second commandments, he writes: “To honor every individual human being, unconditionally every human being, this is the truth and is to fear God and to love *the neighbor*.” Kierkegaard ends this note calling for the individual: “A crowd is formed of individuals; consequently each one has the power to remain what he is—an individual.”⁸⁴

The Chinese excerpt Shi read also includes two passages from Kierkegaard’s “Note 2: On My Work and ‘the Single Individual.’” In the first passage, Kierkegaard describes his task “as a lowly servant . . . *without authority* . . . to prompt, if possible, to invite, to induce the many to press through this narrow pass, *the single individual*.” Kierkegaard continues, “if I were to request an inscription on my grave, I request none other than that single individual; Even if it is not understood now, it surely will be.” A footnote accompanying the passage reads: “The reader will recall that this was written in 1847. The world upheavals in 1848 have forced the understanding considerably closer.”⁸⁵

After witnessing the upheavals of China’s Cultural Revolution in a social experiment along the lines of what Kierkegaard had referenced in 1848, Shi writes his narrative of becoming an individual as if answering Kierkegaard’s call. He distances himself from the religious crowd and the political crowd. In *Fragmented Writings* I:15, Shi also emphasizes a permanent distance between humans and God. He credits Liu Xiaofeng’s 刘小枫 work for this idea; Liu was in fact introducing Karl Barth’s theology criticizing Nazi German ideology.⁸⁶ Shi warns that “disaster will follow” if “worldly power abuses human belief in God, and the authority to define hope falls into the hands of powerful bandits.”⁸⁷ Shi affirms the value of literature in helping us to seek the truth and ask questions: “After Auschwitz, people became skeptical about poetry. But perhaps this very skepticism has allowed people to hear the message of poetry anew.”⁸⁸

⁸⁴ SKS 16, 87–91 / PV, 107–112.

⁸⁵ SKS 16, 98–99 / PV, 118 (emphasis in original).

⁸⁶ Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, “Shangdi jiu shi Shangdi” 上帝就是上帝 [God is God], in *Zouxiang Shizijia shang de zhen* 走向十字架上的真 [Approaching the truth on the cross] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1994), pp. 56–57.

⁸⁷ Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:13, p. 12.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, I:15, p. 14.

Adopting the Pauline triple framework of faith, hope, and love, Shi nevertheless positions himself as a seeker of God rather than a believer in a religion. He insists on an individual's solitary relationship with God, apparently driven by the fear of the political and religious crowds. Shi writes about his personal repentance with Kierkegaard's insistence on writing "without authority." While composing his 1996 novel *Wuxu Biji* 务虚笔记 (Notes on Principles),⁸⁹ he realized: "I have all of the same thoughts and behaviors of all of the characters I'm writing about," though some are still dormant.⁹⁰ Writers "should not preach," but "should contribute stories of how they got lost."⁹¹ As an example, Shi confesses his lack of righteous action during the Cultural Revolution. He participated as a Red Guard storming into a professor's home, but was later sidelined for not being "red enough."⁹²

Becoming an individual became Shi's redemption. Working in a Shanxi village in Northwest China during the "Shangshan xiexiang" 上山下乡 (Up to the mountains, down to the countryside), Shi suddenly "saw through that game: I am not 'we,' and I don't want to be 'them,' so I can only be [the indeterminate] 'you' . . . 'We' can be strengthened through isolating 'them.'"⁹³ Shi echoes Kierkegaard's point regarding how a person contributes his portion of cowardliness when escaping into the crowd. If someone had demanded that he chose sides, he too would not have dared to take a stand different from the crowd.⁹⁴ He writes that "it was probably around this time that I started becoming terrified of 'we.'" He also states that "we" emanates a "magic spell" which "so confuses people that they yearn to be swallowed into 'we.'" The position of "we," Shi cautions, can easily "turn into a magic law and constrain individual thoughts and feelings." This "magic law" was at work when "the atrocities of the Cultural Revolution were perpetrated." As the expression of "loyalty [to the leader] became more passionate, valiance turned into savage violence. Reason fell apart. Belief degenerated into frenzy."⁹⁵ The Cultural Revolution is, in essence, "an instance of the catastrophe of belief."⁹⁶ In addition, Shi also references China's Taiping Rebellion (Taiping Tianguo 太平天国), whose leader, Hong

⁸⁹ Shi Tiesheng, *Shi Tiesheng Works in Series*, vol. 5 (Beijing: Renmin wenzue chubanshe, 2011).

⁹⁰ Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:16, p. 14.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, I:16, p. 15.

⁹² *Ibid.*, I:18, p. 16.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, I:19, pp. 17–18.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, I:20, pp. 19–20.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, I:21, p. 19.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, I:22, p. 19.

Xiuquan 洪秀全 (1812–1864), claimed himself to be a younger brother of Jesus.⁹⁷ Even when acknowledging the final judgment,⁹⁸ Shi hesitates between believing and not believing in heaven.⁹⁹ Conversion lands one “zai lu shang” 在路上 (on the way).¹⁰⁰ Heaven exists on this way.¹⁰¹

To become a self and to define writing as an act of love, Shi creates an antithesis to Kierkegaard’s “individual” by stressing existing subject positions that he must negate. Calling the suffering of the entire generation of the “sent-down youths” a trial, he rejects the Buddhist path to leave the world to escape suffering as well as existentialism. Acknowledging life can be absurd, Shi continues:

Perhaps this human world is nothing more than a purgatory? We come here to serve out a prison sentence, to search our souls and to be tried, and to be reeducated (transforming the objective and subjective worlds at the same time). Going down to the countryside and descending to the world of the immortals both lead to the same result.¹⁰²

Shi lists three fictional characters from two classical Chinese novels as examples of the mythic characters who “go to the human world” to deepen their “understanding of suffering through spending some time in a prison of flesh.”¹⁰³ Zhu Bajie 猪八戒 (a.k.a., Pigsy) and Sun Wukong 孙悟空 (a.k.a. the Monkey King) are two of the four disciples to Xuan Zang 玄奘 (Tripitaka) in *Xiyou ji* 西游记 (The journey to the west),¹⁰⁴ a fictional narrative of the historical Tang monk’s (c. 596 or 602–664) journey to India to seek out Buddhist scriptures. After causing havoc in the Daoist Yudi’s 玉帝 (Jade Emperor) heaven, Wukong was trapped by Buddha under a mountain. After drunkenly flirting with the moon goddess, Bajie, the former Marshal of the Heavenly Reeds, was punished by banishment to

⁹⁷ Ibid., III:24, p. 117.

⁹⁸ Ibid., I:28, I:29, pp. 24–25.

⁹⁹ Ibid., I:35, p. 29.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., I:50, p. 43.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., I:51, p. 44.

¹⁰² Ibid., I:54, p. 45.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Wu Cheng’en 吴承恩, *The Journey to the West*, volumes 1–4, trans. Anthony C. Yu (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980–1983).

Earth, where he became a fiend.¹⁰⁵ The Bodhisattva Guanyin 观音 converted them to Buddhism.¹⁰⁶ The group then endures eighty-one tribulations and finally arrives in India. Wukong achieves Buddhahood and leaves the world. Jia Baoyu 贾宝玉, the protagonist in *Shitou ji* 石头记 (The story of the stone),¹⁰⁷ was previously a stone in the celestial realm yearning to experience the human world of poetry and prosperity. Born into the aristocratic Jia family carrying a piece of jade in his mouth, Baoyu grows up rejecting his family's high hope that he become a Confucian official. He prefers the life of an aesthete among his female cousins in a family garden. He eventually leaves his family in a move that is interpreted as him becoming a Buddhist monk. Shi says that for the fictional characters, leaving the world is seemingly a relief, "as if Sisyphus' Road has finally come to an end, as if one day he could go home and everything would be fine."¹⁰⁸ In a suffering existence such as his, he does not see hope in escaping from the world. He must move beyond any existing subject position.¹⁰⁹

Analyzing Shi's deep engagement with Christian ideas, Chloe Starr concludes that Shi "points towards the great biblical narratives of creation and suffering, to myths and dreams for insight." However, Starr clarifies the differences between Shi's ideas and Christian theology:

Where a theologian like David Kelsey . . . presents a theocentric and trinitarian account, asking what "a specifically Christian conviction that God actively relates to humans" implies about who we are and how we are to be (Kelsey 159), Shi parts company: while God relates to humans, that relationship is all but unfathomable. The process of understanding is our undertaking. For Shi, it is not so much the Cross that points to eschatological consummation as the way of the cross; Christ's suffering does not atone so much as reveal the meaning of human life.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ Yu's translation refers to Bajie abstaining from "five forbidden viands" and "three undesirable foods" as soon as he was converted (ibid., vol. 1, p. 193). "Eight Precepts" is a standard literal translation of "Bajie." "Wukong" translates literally to "Wake to Vacuity" (ibid., p. 82).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 180–197.

¹⁰⁷ Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹, *Shitou ji* 石头记, *The Story of the Stone: A Novel in Five Volumes*, trans. David Hawkes and John Minford (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1973). The novel is also known as *Honglou meng* 红楼梦 [The dream of the red chamber]. "Jia Baoyu" literally means "fake jade."

¹⁰⁸ Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:54, p. 46.

¹⁰⁹ Elsewhere I identify Shi's negation of other collective positions, including the exile, the Daoist, the disabled, and the nationalist. Chen, "The Solitary Writer," pp. 69–72.

¹¹⁰ Starr, "Nature of the Human," p. 113. Starr quotes David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009).

Shi's narrative of becoming an author indicates how he adheres to the idea of trial as he deeply engages with Christian ideas. Describing his left hand holding his right hand, he sees "I," the writing subject, advising "him"—the physically suffering Shi Tiesheng—to see this world as a place of "trials and tempering."¹¹¹ He writes: "I see his heart's movement [xinliu 心流] entering the dark of night again and again. Death is not the end. His blessing is but one sentence, 'Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"¹¹² In John 20:25, Thomas had announced "Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe." When the resurrected Jesus later appeared to Thomas, Thomas called him "My Lord and My God." Then Jesus said the quoted blessing. Within Shi's context, the reference to John 20:29 reads like Shi acknowledging his belief in Christ's resurrection, and that he indeed understood Kierkegaard's "subjective truth."

However, quoting this blessing later, Shi wavers between believing and not believing in Christ's divinity. On the believing side, *Fragmented Writings* III:33 reiterates "believe though having not seen" and the importance of repentance in personal encounters with God.¹¹³ Shi also calls "the kitchen god, the god of wealth, the goddess that sends children to people" worshipped in Chinese culture "idols" because they "have nothing to do with spiritual salvation."¹¹⁴ He prefers "righteousness through faith."¹¹⁵ Shortly after, Shi expresses uncertainty regarding God's personalness and an ambiguity about Christ's divinity. He admits that for living, he has benefited from "Jidu jingsheng" 基督精神 (Christ's spirit), but regarding death, he agrees with the Buddhist teaching, that "what is usually meant by death refers to an end of the physiological phenomenon."¹¹⁶

In *Fragmented Writings* V:30, Shi refers to "kuruo de Shangdi" 苦弱的上帝 (the suffering and weak God), Liu Xiaofeng's rendition of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "suffering God."¹¹⁷ It seems that Shi views God through the lens of this translation. In a letter dated June 25, 2003 to writer Wang Shuo 王朔, who had apparently shared thoughts with Shi about the

¹¹¹ Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, II:42, pp. 92–93.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, II:43, p. 94.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, III:33, pp. 123–124.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, IV:1, p. 131.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, IV:3, 7, pp. 133, 137.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, IV:10, p. 139.

¹¹⁷ Liu Xiaofeng, "Fendan Shangdi de Kuruo" 分担上帝的苦弱 [Sharing in God's suffering and vulnerability/weakness], in *Zouxiang Shizijia shang de zhen* 走向十字架上的真 [Approaching the truth on the cross] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1994), pp. 133–163.

Buddhist belief, Shi again quotes John 20:29.¹¹⁸ In a second letter to Wang, dated July 15, 2003, Shi asks Wang to read Liu Xiaofeng, and then continues: “Christ’s God is a suffering and weak God. Except for sending his son to be with the suffering in the world, and to advocate love, He has no other option.”¹¹⁹ He calls Jesus a human being just like Moses.¹²⁰ In a 2008 essay titled “Believe Though Having Not Seen,”¹²¹ Shi again prefers “justification through faith.” Addressing Chinese people’s suspicion of Christianity because of its association with “some hegemony,”¹²² Shi separates Christ from the Christian religion. Calling Jesus the son of God, Shi also compares Ksitigarbha saying “if I don’t go to hell who will” to Jesus’ being nailed to the cross.¹²³

In “Zhou Xin Jidu,” Shi confesses that the fear of offending people was his “guji” 痼疾 (chronic illness). He desires to mediate between Christians and Buddhists.¹²⁴ He admits that he adopts the Christian spirit to face suffering and to live with love, but he also accepts the Buddhist idea of staying away from the world and suffering, as a form of therapy for nightly personal restorations.¹²⁵ Shi’s contemporary, writer Deng Xiaomang 邓晓芒, sees this as the main idea of the essay.¹²⁶ In Shi’s words, he recognizes a weakness in Christianity in providing such restoration.¹²⁷ This matches his perception of the “suffering and weak God.”

Chen remarks that Shi moved back to Buddhism.¹²⁸ However, Shi rejects, until the end, the Buddhist explanation of suffering and the concept of reincarnation.¹²⁹ A pattern in *Fragmented Writings* demonstrates his thinking: using a Christian idea and adding another

¹¹⁸ Shi Tiesheng, “Gei Wang Shuo de Xin” 给王朔的信 [Letters to Wang Shuo], in *Zhou xin Jidu, Ye Xin Fo* 昼信基督夜信佛 (Beijing: Shiyue wenyi chubanshe, 2012), p. 157.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹²¹ Shi Tiesheng, *Fulun wenlu, Wangxiang yu dianying* 扶轮问路, 妄想与电影 [Ask for the way in a wheelchair, fantasy films], in *Shi Tiesheng Works in Series*, vol. 7 (Beijing: Renmin wenxue chubanshe, 2011), pp. 63–68.

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 65–66.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹²⁴ Shi, “Zhou xin Jidu,” p. 3.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Deng Xiaomang 邓晓芒, “Shi Tiesheng de zhexue—Tiesheng 67 sui shengri” 史铁生的哲学—铁生 67 岁生日 [Shi Tiesheng’s philosophy: on Tiesheng’s 67th birthday], *Aisixiang*, January 21, 2018, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/107981.html>.

¹²⁷ Shi, “Zhou xin Jidu,” p. 9.

¹²⁸ Lang Chen 陈朗, “佛陀的归来: 史铁生的文学与‘宗教’” [The Return of Buddha: Shi Tiesheng’s Literature and “Religion”], *Dangdai Zuoqia Pinglun* 当代作家评论 [Contemporary writers review] 2018, no. 1: p. 76.

¹²⁹ Shi, “Zhou xin Jidu,” see pp. 5, 17, and 25.

religious name next to it. Shi mentions Buddha and Buddhist teaching thirty-one times throughout the book, but only *Fragmented Writings* I:24 is close to acknowledging Buddha as a deity. Shi describes conversion as the moment when humans are called to turn to God's light, "whether you call it the way of Buddha's law or God [*Shangdi*]." Shi then references the biblical concept of original sin. His language of light, interrogation and repentance as "God's deep concern for us" echoes John 8:12.¹³⁰ Clearly, the main concepts are from Christianity. In V:18, he declares that "God exists before his name is revealed." Sharing the Chinese creation story of the goddess Nüwa 女娲 and Fuxi 伏羲, he continues: "There is no need to be concerned about God's name. When God's nature is clarified, God's appearance can adapt to local customs."¹³¹ This is appropriating Christianity.

4. A Concluding Thought

Speaking of the "historical importance" of *Repetition*, Carlisle suggests that "one might go so far as to say that 'existentialism' began in 1843 with Kierkegaard's proclamation of repetition as philosophy's 'new category'" in *Repetition*.¹³² On the other hand, Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, addressing the Chinese familiarity with "cunzai zhuyi" 存在主义 (existentialism), calls attention to a theistic "cunzai zhexue" 存在哲学 (the philosophy of existence), which Kierkegaard developed.¹³³ The young man's concept of "trial" affirms contending with God in suffering and seeking hope and happiness, thus fitting Liu's "philosophy of existence." Shi, who was familiar with Liu's book,¹³⁴ agrees with Liu on seeing hope in Job, not in existentialism.

Both Kierkegaard and Shi acknowledge that no human could grasp the depth of their sufferings. Toward the end of his life, Kierkegaard told his best friend Emil Boesen that his life was "a great suffering, unknown and inexplicable to other people."¹³⁵ The words were almost identical to those of the young man in *Repetition*.¹³⁶ However, even knowing

¹³⁰ Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, I:24, p. 21. Shi alludes to John 8:1-11 in *Fragmented Writings* III:27-28, pp. 118-120.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, V:18, pp. 155-156.

¹³² Carlisle, "Kierkegaard's *Repetition*," p. 539.

¹³³ Liu Xiaofeng 刘小枫, "Cong juewang zhexue dao shengjing zhexue" 从绝望哲学到圣经哲学 [From philosophy of tragedy to Biblical philosophy], in *Zouxiang Shizijia shang de zhen* 走向十字架上的真 [Approaching the truth on the cross] (Shanghai: Sanlian shudian, 1994), p. 39.

¹³⁴ Chen Ximi, WeChat direct message to author, September 21, 2024.

¹³⁵ Carlisle, *Philosopher of Heart*, pp. 247-248.

¹³⁶ SKS 4, 71 / R, 203.

that his remaining resources had just been spent on his final publication, Kierkegaard was “very happy,” and at the same time he was “very sad, because I cannot share my joy with anyone.”¹³⁷ Though loved by many fellow writers, Shi too suggested that he was lonely.¹³⁸ Like Kierkegaard, he wanted to be understood. And he was honest about the fact that his writings do not constitute any scholarly discourse.¹³⁹ Committed to the ideal of being the “singular individual,” he did not create a theology to be followed.

¹³⁷ Carlisle, *Philosopher of Heart*, p. 248.

¹³⁸ See the description of his left hand holding his right hand in Shi, *Fragmented Writings*, II:42, p. 92.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, II:6, p. 55.